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ABSTRACT

A deductive-inductive sequence of writing instruction, in which students are instructed systematically before they begin to write, would help students learn to write well. Educators who propose a trial and error pattern ignore the facts that those learning to write do not have unlimited time in which to learn and are not dealing with an inherent learning propensity, as in learning to speak. Even in learning to speak, children need planned systematic teaching if they are to avoid errors. Planned intervention is even more necessary to growth in reading. Writing is the most difficult language skill to learn, is highly dependent upon mastery in other areas, particularly reading, and is the most important skill; much more teaching time and effort should be spent on it. Students should first be taught the fundamentals of rhetoric and style; they should then be made aware, through analysis of good literature, of varieties of styles and their uses. Only then can they begin to develop their own writing styles. They should not be plunged headlong into the writing task and allowed to commit errors where they may. Teachers should assume ignorance on the students' part and practice preventive teaching of writing. (GW)

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Instruction First, Writing Later

Mauricio H. Usher

I am totally at odds with English teachers who subscribe to the laissez-faire philosophy in the teaching of composition. Among those teachers who subscribe to this philosophy are Richard Friedrich and Elizabeth McPherson both of whom argued that, because pupils can and do write well, there is little need for formal instruction:

> [Resolved: that] we try to remove the impression that writing is a matter of 'getting it right,' . . . [that since] past experience has given most of our students . . . the notion that they're 'bad in English' [which resulted in their being] afraid to write because someone has convinced them that they can't, [we will make it] our main job to eradicate that impression. . . . ("English at Forest Park Community College" in College English, vol. 35, # 8, May 1974, p. 886)

It seems to me that continued adherence to such pedagogical philosophy can only render our already chaotic situation much more so. In fact, it is this very philosophical stance which has led to the pitiful literacy condition in which students now find themselves--their inability to read, speak, or write well.

Most teachers would agree that our students do not write well and, consequently, are in need of formal instruction before, during, and after writing; though they would sharply disagree about the form this instruction should take. I would like to submit that we adopt the deductive-inductive sequence of writing instruction, and in doing so compare the process of learning to write well to that of learning to speak well.

A young child receives auditory linguistic stimuli from parents, relatives, and admirers; from these stimuli he generalizes, practices, and is corrected (hopefully) by the very sources of the stimuli. From these corrections he again generalizes, practices, and is once more corrected and the process is repeated until language has been mastered. This is the deductive-inductive process in that some sort of pre-instruction has been received. It is true that this instruction received at first is unplanned (the corrections are not);

nevertheless, instruction it is; and we should note that, without it, the learner would have had no linguistic base upon which to build. Likewise, he who must learn to write well must first be exposed to visual linguistic stimuli--the written word--from which he may generalize, practice, err, and, as a consequence, receive corrective instruction from his reader(s). In spite of the difference between the forms of stimuli, most educators would concur that these linguistic developmental patterns are strikingly similar. My suggestion that parents and teachers take students in hand and lead them, step by step, through this process is made on the basis of this affinity.

But it is upon this very affinity that James Moffett, if I read him correctly, has constructed an opposing argument, an argument in favor of the inductive-deductive sequence--with emphasis upon the trial-and-error, followed by correction, pattern the young (language) learner uses:

> . . . The trial and error sounds to many people like a haphazard, time-consuming business, a random behavior of children, animals, and others who don't know any better. . . . Trial and error is by definition never aimless, but without help the individual alone may not think of all the kinds of trials that are possible, or may always see how to learn the most from his errors. . . . The teacher does not try to prevent the learner from making errors. He does not preteach the problems and solutions. . . . The learner simply plunges into the assignment, uses all his resources, makes errors where he must, and needs the feedback. In this action-response learning, errors are valuable; they are essential learning instruments. They are not despised or penalized. Inevitably, the child who is afraid to make mistakes is a retarded learner, no matter what the activity in question.(James Moffett, Teaching the Universe of Discourse, 1968, p. 199)

Moffett repudiates the deductive-inductive "instruction first" method:

> There is no evidence that preteaching general facts and theories about how people use language will help a student learn how to write. . . . Since the most natural assumption should be that one learns to write by writing, the burden of proof is on those who advocate the indirect method, by which I mean presenting codification about rhetoric and composition in the hope that students will apply them.
> (Teaching the Universe of Discourse, p. 204)

I do agree with Moffett that students learn by doing; however, learning to write is a unique process of language learning: the propensity to learn the spoken language is inherent, as we all know. Not so with writing. It is the last and least likely linguistic skill to be learned, let alone mastered. I must agree also that, given enough time, many students may learn to write on their own; but most of them lack that indomitable spirit necessary to overcome such a handicap. Most students must be taught; and they must be instructed as quickly, effectively, and as economically as possible. Moffett's inductive-deductive method is fine for the blabbering infant for two reasons: 1) as long as he is normal and lives in society, he is bound to learn the language--man is a speaking animal; 2) he has all the time at his disposal. In fact, he has much more time than he will ever need since a normal child will have mastered the spoken word long before entry into the elementary school; hence, there is enough time for him to experiment, err, and be corrected. It costs very little to teach a child how to speak--if he is normal.

Not so with writing. He who is learning to write does not have all the time at his disposal, is not dealing with an inherent learning propensity, and, consequently, cannot permit himself to experiment and err where he must. He will soon discover that time and money are a premium; and, to conserve these, errors must be avoided when at all possible. And how will he avoid these errors unless he knows what they are? And how will he know them unless he is pretaught? Do we not know that too many children enter high school without having grasped the bare basics of writing? This, then, is the basis for my argument: we do not have the time nor the finance to teach writing as Moffett suggests. Besides, the fact that students fail to apply their learning is no excuse for not preteaching. Teachers are not to be faulted if pupils fail to apply what has been taught. When writing, it is

more profitable that students be made aware of the techniques of the art and not use them than to be forced to commit time-consuming and unnecessary errors, errors they would have eagerly avoided--had they known better.

But before presenting the details of my proposal, it might be well to analyze the causes so that the remedies to be put forth might be seen in a clearer light. I am convinced that parents' and teachers' inability and/or unwillingness to nurture their charges beyond the mere elementary stages of linguistic growth--both in the spoken and written areas--has resulted in the widespread language disabilities now in evidence. Parents and relatives do contribute, for the most part, to the young child's linguistic growth via their daily parlance; but this is done without plan--at random. The linguistic stimuli received by the young learner were picked up here and there, so to speak. But there was no concerted effort to teach the child. Now, as Moffett has noted, there was no need to do so--except that, as we all know, the child speaks what he hears and, too often he hears 'bad grammar.' Too, many of his generalizations are erroneous and, if not corrected, will be embedded in his linguistic repertoire. In too many instances this is precisely what happens. This fact lends much support to Moffett's post-teaching theory; however, even this vital phase of teaching has been ignored by these parents and relatives. As a consequence, the pupil finds himself, upon entry into elementary school, years behind many of his classmates. He has discovered, too late, that either his linguistic growth has been hopelessly stunted or has been allowed to proceed irrevocably along the path of improper language usage. Many of our reticent students who express themselves in grunts, groans, and "you know's" are the products of situations such as this. When this student is, at last, introduced to reading, monumental will be the task since, for all practical purposes, he will be learning a second language. Needless to point out that,

as far as he is concerned, writing is out of the question.

Happily, there are those parents and relatives who do take time to provide their young with the needed preteaching and feedback. In these homes the learner travels the deductive-inductive road to linguistic mastery the details of which are too well known to repeat here. Suffice it that we note the deliberateness of this method. The child's success is no mere accident; it is the direct and happy result of intense and concerted planned preteaching, learning and feedback. In these homes it was assumed that the propensity to learn language is inherent, but that the propensity to learn it correctly is not. The child, then, can now avoid 'logical' errors as "runned," "sitted," "goed," and others from taking hold. These errors will not leave him unless driven away by planned systematic teaching which involves the techniques to which I have referred. But if this systematic method is vital at this stage, it is much more so at the following stages--reading and writing--to which I now turn.

Unlike the previously discussed student for whom learning to read is akin to the learning of a second language, this pupil's reading difficulties can be easily overcome--if someone would take the time to instruct him. But, alas, few parents or relatives bother to impart to their charges anything more than the bare essentials of reading. They forget or are ignorant of the fact that the initial stage of linguistic acquisition--speaking--can be initiated and mastered, to a certain degree, with minimum planned tutorship. Not so this intermediate stage--the reading stage. No longer will a "running course" in language suffice, nor will the mere presence of linguistic stimuli; hence, the uselessness of the television set at this stage of the pupil's linguistic growth. Equally useless are the magazines, newspapers, and billboards; hence, the dire need for planned intervention by

parents, relatives, and teachers. Unfortunately, neither tend to do much for the needy pupil and, as a consequence, this once promising student now finds himself in a situation similar to that of his counterpart from a less concerned home.

But even if these students, from both careful and careless homes, do manage to progress beyond the remedial and developmental stages of reading ability, what of the final, and most difficult, stage--writing? I am aware that there is often no clear-cut developmental nexus between learning to read and learning to write. It appears, though, that the former is normally perfected before the latter; in fact, mastery of the latter is heavily dependent upon prior perfection of the former. And it is common knowledge, or it should be, that he who cannot read well will never write well. Obviously then, appropriate instruction in reading and good reading habits are prime prerequisites to be fulfilled if excellence in writing is to be achieved. Parents, relatives, teachers, and school officials should mindful of this; but, alas, many are not, or do not appear to be. And I am convinced that they are responsible, in part, for the host of high school and college students who, though they exhibit relatively high degree of speaking skills, read rather poorly and, consequently, write even more so--if they do at all. It would appear that much more teaching time, more effort, and more money would be spent in this endeavor since writing is not only the least likely of the communicative skills to be learned, the learning of which is highly dependent upon mastery in other areas--particulary reading--but is also the most important. In spite of all this, many teachers and schools--particularly at the secondary level--practice the laissez-faire doctrine--despite the obvious need to do otherwise. Sooner or later they and their charges are faced with the two diverged roads of padagogical quandary: should the

techniques of writing be taught or should the pupil be left alone to "develop his own style"? And, like Frost, neither pupil nor teacher can travel both roads. Too often, though, the teacher opts for the latter. I propose that we take the former--the one least travelled.

Let me preface the details of my proposal with quotations from two writers (one from the seventeenth century, the other from the twentieth) both of whom argue that reading not only maketh a critical mind but also a good writer:

> And now . . . will be the time to read with them those organic arts which enable men to discourse and write perspicuously, elegantly and according to the fitted style of lofty, mean, or lowly.
> (John Milton, "Of Education")

Since Milton is no friend of many present-day English teachers his advice is not likely to be taken seriously. But similar advice from the pen of one of our contemporaries might strike closer to home:

> For most college students, the best writing comes as a response to ideas presented in the work of the professionals--people who have deeply involved themselves in some aspect of human scene and who have conscientiously worked towards an effective presentation to others. In sharing an exploration with a good writer, the students often finds his own mind freed of stereotype and cliché and led into fresh areas of speculation. He is required to examine his own experience of the world and use it to overlap that of the writer's--either to conform, to integrate, or to challenge. Along the way he may also discover devices for better structuring and developing his own writing. Reading and writing then becomes part of an organic process.
> (Jack S. Romine, Mastering College English, p. 141)

Both Milton and Romine have put before us alternatives worthy of consideration. It is indeed imperative that the pupil be made aware, via analytical perusal of works written by fine authors, of the varieties of styles and their uses before he can embark on the development of his own style. And Moffett would concur in this but would certainly take issue with James Ney who have argued that students be pretaught the fundamentals of rhetoric and style

prior to the study of the written works:

> In the first place . . . the student should be made aware of the types of patterns in the structure and vocabulary of the written language. To do this the teacher will have to acquaint his pupils with a minimum of grammatical analysis. For this exercise, one of the many competing models of grammatical analysis will have to be chosen. Almost any one can be used if it provides an accurate analysis without conveying misinformation. Through the use of such a model, the student should be made to understand the structure of the sentences which are selected as examples, and which are taken from the readings in the course. . . . The student must practice these structures . . . until [they] become an easily produceable part of his linguistic repertoire. The student writer needs this type of practice because in writing . . . the language should flow easily and readily so that the substance of expression, the ideas, might receive full attention. As in mastering a foreign language, the degree of fluency increases in direct proportion to the amount of effective practice expended. . . . ("On Not Practicing Errors" in Teaching Freshman Composition, Gary Tate and Edward Corbett, eds., pp. 246-47.

It is this pedagogical model which would prove most beneficial to students and economical for the school system. Preteaching is its essence. I do not believe that students should be plunged headlong into the task and be allowed to commit errors where they may. Committing errors might be a part of learning, but is certainly not an indispensable part. Pupils can learn and not err; however, if they must, then erring should be reduced as much as possible. Moffett argues as if the more errors students commit the merrier.

All high schools should begin, with the most deliberate speed, programs designed to engage pupils in critical reading (for those who cannot do so) and writing. These programs should be undertaken with the following in mind: that writing can be taught, and that to write well students must be able to use rhetorical techniques properly. But—and this is vital—we must also admit that we have failed to meet our responsibility, and cease our buckpassing. We need to admit that students, indeed, cannot write and that we are responsible. In direct challenge to those who disagree I propose that we assume

ignorance on the students' part and, therefore, practice preventive teaching of writing. This will save time, effort, money, and pains.

There has been much ado about why Johnny cannot write. Curiously enough, this has given rise to more questions than answers, and has sparked nation-wide debates which have given off more heat than light. But the answer is simple: Johnny cannot write simply because too many English teachers, if we deserve to be called by that name, have assumed that, in spite of their ignorance of writing fundamentals, students can write well; hence, there is no need to teach the skill. Others have assumed that writing cannot be taught. Then there are those who have assumed students' inherent knowledge of writing fundamentals and, thus, have taught in such a manner which has led students to do little more than "practice errors," as James Ney has noted. If students were allowed to speak they would tell us two things: 1) that they have no idea what writing is all about--let alone do it well, and 2) that we should teach them how to do it--now.